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978-1-107-69805-5 - The Song of Songs: Edited as a Dramatic Poem

With Introduction, Revised Translation and Excursuses by William Walter Cannon

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. SECULAR POETRY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

THE literature of the Old Testament is so predominantly religious, and everywhere so pervaded by religious influences, that peculiar interest must attach to those small portions of it of which the point of view is entirely secular. Especially this will be the case with regard to *poetry*. The religious poetry of the Hebrews is one of the most remarkable developments of their wonderful history, but this great truth should not be allowed to obscure the fact that they had also some poetry in which no religious interest can be discerned; and which dealt with the joys and sorrows, the interests and emotions of the secular life. Of the secular poems which have been preserved to us may be named:

The ancient song of vengeance. Gen. iv. 23 f.

The Well-digging song. Num. xxi. 17 f.

The ode of triumph over Heshbon. Num. xxi. 27 f.

David's great elegy over Saul and Jonathan. 2 Sam. i. 19 f.  
and his short one over Abner. 2 Sam. iii. 33 f.

To these may be added some fragments or sayings:

Samson's riddle. Jud. xv. 16.

The song of David's triumphs. 1 Sam. xviii. 7.

The little song about Tyre. Is. xxiii. 16.

These valuable remains of a literature otherwise lost to us probably owe their preservation to the fact that they have a bearing on national history, and were preserved by historians as illustrative of the events they were narrating, like certain pieces in prose, such as the *mashal* of Jotham (Jud. ix. 7–16) or the speech of the wise woman of Abel (2 Sam. xx. 18).

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But the *popular* poetry of Israel would be a blank had there not been handed down to us the beautiful poem, springing out of the very life of the people, which is named *The Song of Songs*. This exquisite production reveals to us that, while the poetic genius of the Hebrew nation soared to its highest flights in the expression of religious emotion, there were also poets capable of giving utterance in song to the most universal of all human emotions. The Sacred Canon abounds in writings which view the religious aspect of human life in manifold ways, but the reader may be thankful that one piece has been included which gives lyric expression to what has inspired poets in every age and every country. Old Testament literature would have been incomplete without this poem of *Human Love*<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG.

Although it is evident that this poem deals with *love*, the love of man and woman, its interpretation presents extraordinary difficulties. No book in the Old Testament has given rise to a greater divergence of explanation. Whether this arises from the fact that there is no standard of comparison, because there is nothing at all like this book in Hebrew literature, or from the amount which in any view has to be read between the lines<sup>2</sup> if the poem is to be made intelligible at all, or from the too great ingenuity of theory which has been applied to it, there is no question as to the difficulty. Nor is this lessened by the very large amount of literature which has been devoted to the subject. The student is appalled by mountains of commentary in which every word and letter has been subjected to the most exhaustive examination with the most varying results—by theories supported by the profoundest erudition and the greatest acumen—and by illustrative matter collected with the greatest industry from every quarter. Nor can it be said that any view is so well established as to have obtained the unanimous suffrages of competent judges. The matter is still *sub judice*, and there is hardly any theory or principle of interpretation in support

<sup>1</sup> See v. Orelli in Schaff-Herz. *Enc. art. Song of Songs*.

<sup>2</sup> Driver, *Introd.* 1st ed. p. 411.

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## DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION OF THE SONG 3

of which the powerful authority of eminent scholars could not be quoted. There is an interest, it may be said a fascination, in the subject, which perpetually incites to fresh effort. To everyone who is tempted once more to essay the difficult task of interpretation, the problem makes a fresh appeal. The labours of a long train of his predecessors lie before him—perchance while utilising their results he may avoid their extravagances. Perhaps he may be able to make some little contribution to a sound exegesis in the future, to lay a stone which may serve to support the solid edifice which the destined interpreter will some day build. Let us then adventure this daring quest and once more examine this enigmatical text: let us also make our endeavour to arrive at a theory of its interpretation. The field is open to all. It has been well observed that the proof of the soundness of such an attempt can only be such a degree of success in explanation as without solving every difficulty may on the whole recommend itself by simplicity and adherence to the text<sup>1</sup>. Simplicity indeed seems to be the quality most to be desired in such a task. The more elaborate and complicated the scheme of interpretation is, the more vulnerable it becomes, because it presents more points for attack. It will be the aim of the following pages to examine the principal questions which arise upon the text with regard to the various views which have been formed upon them, and to endeavour to extract from this mass of materials some conclusions which may not only render this ancient poem intelligible, but may also bring out its beauties and reveal its ethical purpose.

## 3. THE TITLE PREFIXED TO THE POEM.

This poem has no title, the superscription i. 1 having been added at a later date. This is agreed by all commentators on the ground of the demonstrative pronoun made use of, which differs from that used throughout the poem<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> “Den einzig durchschlagenden Beweis für die Richtigkeit derselben kann selbstverständlich nur der gelungene Versuch leisten, die einheitliche Entwicklung der Handlung bis zu einem befriedigenden Abschlusse in einer Weise durchzuführen welche vielleicht im einzelnen wohl noch dunkle Stellen zurücklässt, im ganzen aber durch Einfachheit und textgemässe Auslegung sich empfiehlt.” Oettli.

<sup>2</sup>  $\text{שׁוֹן}$  in the superscription,  $\text{שׁוֹן}$  in the poem—see in Exc. III. *post*.

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The expression “The Song of Songs” שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים does not mean “a Song consisting of a number of Songs,” nor can the whole phrase mean, “one of Solomon’s many songs,” with a reference to 1 Kings v. 12<sup>1</sup>. The expression *Song of Songs* is an ordinary Hebrew form of the superlative and means here “The best of all possible songs,” “The finest poem of all poems<sup>2</sup>.” The question of authorship will be dealt with in another place, but the above designation makes it clear that the author, whoever he might be, could not have written the superscription. No author, whatever his own opinion of the value of his production, could write on the title-page “The best of all songs.” This title must rather be considered to be the verdict of a later age when the pre-eminent beauty of the Song was generally admitted.

The Targum, commenting on this title, observes, “Ten songs were uttered in this world. The best of all these was this one.” The ten songs are then detailed.

“The first at the time when Adam received pardon for his guilt on the Sabbath day which came to shield him” (Psalm xcii).

The second the song of Moses (Ex. xv).

The third the song of the well (Num. xxi. 17).

The fourth the song of Moses (Deut. xxxii).

The fifth the song of Joshua when the sun and moon stood still (Jos. x. 12).

The sixth the song of Barak and Deborah (Jud. v).

The seventh the song of Hannah (1 Sam. ii).

The eighth David’s song (2 Sam. xxii).

“The ninth song was sung by Solomon king of Israel by means of the Holy Spirit before the Lord, Sovereign of the Universe.

And the tenth song will once be sung by the children of the exile when they shall be redeemed from captivity” (see Is. xxx. 29)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Delitzsch, *Com.*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Gen. ix. 25, עֶבֶד עֶבְדִים, “the vilest slave,” Exod. xxvi. 33, קִדְשׁ הַקִּדְשִׁים, “the very holiest place,” and many other examples, *Ges.-K.* 133. 3i.

<sup>3</sup> *The Targum to the Song of Songs*, trans. by H. Gollancz. Lusac and Co., 1909, pp. 7–9.

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## THE TITLE PREFIXED TO THE POEM 5

So Origen, in his First Homily on the Canticles, after enumerating the six songs in Exod. xv; Num. xxiv; Deut. xxxii; Jud. v; 2 Sam. xxii; Ps. xviii and Is. v, and remarking on each, proceeds "When thou shalt have passed through all, ascend yet higher, so that with reverent mind thou mayest be able with the bridegroom to sing also this Song of Songs<sup>1</sup>."

## 4. THE UNITY OF THE POEM.

The first question for consideration in regard to the Song is this: Is it one piece with a real internal unity, or a collection of unconnected fragments? The latter opinion was expressed by some of the older commentators, *e.g.* by Magnus (1842), who "could see in this book nothing else than a collection of various erotic pieces; some perfect, others imperfect, some amended, others interpolated, all the work of different authors and written in various ages<sup>2</sup>." This view, after being laid to rest for some time, was revived by Budde and Siegfried in a somewhat different form and has now many adherents. According to Budde the poem is "a bundle of love songs<sup>3</sup>," of which he counts twenty-three. Siegfried considers it "a collection of ten songs<sup>4</sup>." It is impossible to form any judgment upon the interpretation of this poem unless this very important question, as to whether it is an artistic whole or a mere mosaic of fragments, be first decided.

There are two ways of arriving at such a decision: (1) by examining the structure and language of the poem, (2) by ascertaining whether it reveals a connected story or argument running through it. It is proposed in this place to see what can be learned from its structure and its language<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Quum universa transieris, ad altiora conscende ut possis anima decora cum sponso et hoc canere Canticum Canticorum* (Interp. Hier. *Opp.*, ed. Vallarsi, 1735, III. p. 501).

<sup>2</sup> Ginsburg, *Com.* p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> "An ein Bündel von Liebesliedern ist deshalb nach allen Anzeichen zuerst zu denken, nur diese Annahme vermag alle Erscheinungen zu erklären" (p. xvi).

<sup>4</sup> "So wie uns das Hohelied überliefert ist, lässt sich in demselben eine Sammlung von 10 Liedern bzw. Liederkränzen erkennen, deren einige verstümmelt oder glossiert sind" (p. 91).

<sup>5</sup> For much of what follows, see Oettli, *Com.*, p. 156; Bruston, *La Sulammite*, p. 10 f.

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In the first place the poem is obviously framed on a plan. It is divided into five portions, the first four of which are closed by an adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem, ii. 7, iii. 5, v. 8, viii. 4, each marking a pause in the movement or action of the poem. Although these four formulæ are not exactly like each other they are so much so that it can hardly be doubted that they must have been designed to articulate the poem and form a framework on which to arrange the episodes, as well as in three instances, ii. 7, iii. 5, viii. 4, to point the moral of what has gone before, and to lead up to and prepare the reader for the great moral of the poem viii. 6, 7. It is equally obvious that such a formula was not necessary and would have been out of place at the end of the poem, viii. 14, and was therefore not inserted there. Such a deliberate construction of the poem cannot be fortuitous. It must be the result of a deliberate, thought-out scheme. The same poet must have written these four adjurations, and have written them to form the framework and to further the didactic and ethical purpose of his poem. The structure of the poem reveals its unity<sup>1</sup>.

Turning to the language of the poem we find that while it is full of characteristic and most peculiar phrases and words, some of which are found nowhere else in Old Testament literature; these are distributed impartially over all parts of the poem, and persons and things mentioned casually in one place are mentioned equally casually in others. Thus:

The daughters of Jerusalem, i. 5; ii. 7; iii. 5, 10, 11; v. 8, 16; viii. 4.

Shulammit's brothers, i. 6; viii. 8.

Her mother, iii. 4; viii. 2, 5.

"My vineyard" [כרמי שלי] used figuratively, i. 6, viii. 12.

Keeping a vineyard [נטר], nowhere else in Old Testament, i. 6; viii. 11, 12.

"Whom my soul loves," i. 7; iii. 1—4.

The companions of the lover, i. 7; viii. 13.

The lover tending his flocks, i. 7; ii. 16; vi. 2, 3.

"O fairest among women," i. 8; v. 9; vi. 1.

<sup>1</sup> "Es ist *Einheit* in diesem Büchlein, denn es zeigt einen Gedankenfortschritt in mehrfacher Richtung, und erst bei seiner Annahme sind alle Theile verständlich." König, *Einleit.* p. 422.

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## THE UNITY OF THE POEM

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“My friend” [רעיתי], addressed to Shulamite, i. 9, 15; ii. 2, 10, 13; iv. 1, 7; v. 2; vi. 4.

Nard, i. 12; iv. 13, 14; nowhere else in Old Testament.

Henna-flower [כפר], i. 14; iv. 13; nowhere else in Old Testament.

“Thine eyes are doves,” i. 15; iv. 1; v. 12.

“Sick with love,” ii. 5; v. 8.

“O that his left hand were under my head and his right hand were embracing me,” ii. 6; viii. 3.

The lover like a gazelle, ii. 9, 17; viii. 14.

“Fawn” [עפר], ii. 9, 17; iv. 5; vii. 4; viii. 14; nowhere else in Old Testament.

Grape-bloom [כמר], ii. 13, 15; vii. 13; nowhere else in Old Testament.

“Let me hear thy voice,” ii. 14; viii. 13.

Shulamite tends the vineyards, i. 6; ii. 15; vii. 13.

“He feeds his flock among the lilies,” ii. 16; vi. 3.

“My beloved is mine and I am his,” ii. 16; vi. 3; vii. 11.

“Till the day breathe and the shadows flee,” ii. 17; iv. 6.

“Be like a gazelle *on the mountains*,” ii. 17; viii. 14.

The two dream-scenes, iii. 1–4; v. 2–7.

The house of the mother, iii. 4; viii. 2, 5.

“Who is this coming up from the desert?” iii. 6; viii. 5.

Repetition of iv. 1–3, in vi. 5–7 with the word <sup>לְשׁוֹן</sup> (meaning uncertain; nowhere else in Old Testament), iv. 1; vi. 5.

Two breasts—two fawns, iv. 5; vii. 4.

Caresses sweeter than wine, i. 2; iv. 16.

Precious things [מנורים], iv. 12, 16; vii. 14.

“My dove, my perfect one,” v. 2; vi. 9.

Beds of balsam, v. 13 (reading <sup>עֲרִינֹת</sup>), vi. 2.

The vine has sprouted, the pomegranates have flowered, vi. 11; vii. 13.

The neck compared to a tower, iv. 4; vii. 7.

The palate sweet, v. 16; vii. 10.

Shulamite in the garden, vi. 2, 11; vii. 13; viii. 13.

Caresses [דורים] i. 2, 4; iv. 10; v. 1; vii. 13.

ץ all through.

It is equally important to notice that the other grammatical and linguistic peculiarities of the poem are equally to be found



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in every part of it<sup>1</sup>. Thus examples of the use of masculine for feminine forms of verbs are found, i. 6; ii. 5, 7; v. 8, 9; vii. 2. Examples of masculine for feminine pronouns are found, ii. 7; iv. 2; v. 4, 8; vi. 5, 8, and certain feminine forms do not appear in the poem at all, while the provincial and Aramaic forms are to be found in every part of the piece. The language of Canticles is admittedly so peculiar as to be unique, and it is all equally peculiar.

It is impossible to explain these phenomena satisfactorily, except on the assumption that the poem is one work of one author. Some of the minor peculiarities of grammar and diction might be explained on the theory that popular songs orally handed down would take the forms of speech current in the district where they were first committed to writing<sup>2</sup>. But such an explanation is quite inadequate to explain such phenomena as the structure of the poem and the very numerous and striking phrases found repeated in every part of it. And it must be remembered that they are repeated in a very limited space—the poem is only 116 verses long. The individuality of the author stands out in every part. Even if in any place he may be thought to have made use of existing materials (and this is not very likely) he must have rewritten them in his own language, filled them with his own striking locutions, and transfused them with his own genius. The poem tells us plainly, by facts apparent on the face of it, that it is not a song-cycle or *liederkranz* but an organic whole—that it is the product of one mind at one time—and that being a unity it must be studied and interpreted as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> See Excursus III.

<sup>2</sup> “Dann genügt zur Erklärung der Gleichartigkeit der Stücke, der gleiche Ort und die gleiche Zeit der Sammlung. Vielleicht längst überliefert, erscheinen Volkslieder im Volksmunde stets weitergebildet bis auf den Augenblick der Niederschrift und nehmen das Gewand der Gegend an, in der Mann den Fluss auffängt und fasst.” Budde.



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## THE SONG A DRAMATIC POEM

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## 5. THE SONG A DRAMATIC POEM.

From the time of Origen onwards<sup>1</sup> it has been recognized by nearly all expositors of this poem that it is *dramatic*. The author does not, as in an epic poem, recount or describe in his own person the story or argument he wishes to set forth. The action of the poem is brought out by the agency of speakers who are introduced and characterised, so that, by what they say in various forms, the reader or auditor may be informed of the idea of the piece and the movement of the story. This may be done in various ways—by short ejaculatory speech, i. 4<sup>a</sup>; or longer speech, i. 5, 6, 12–14; ii. 3–8; iv. 1–7; vii. 2–10, &c.; by dialogue, i. 7, 8; i. 16–ii. 2; or by question and answer, v. 9–16; vi. 1, 2; viii. 13, 14. It may also be done by recounting past episodes, vi. 9–vii. 1; or dreams, iii. 1–5; v. 2–7; or by vividly describing episodes through the auditor or spectator, ii. 8–17; iii. 6–11; viii. 5<sup>a</sup>. In such ways as these the poet allows his characters to reveal his action and the argument has to be constructed by putting together the indications derived from these speeches, descriptions and narrations.

This feature of the poem is so marked that it cannot be effaced by any scheme of interpretation or theory of construction. Thus Graetz, who considers the whole poem to be one long monologue of the Shulamite, without any other speaker being introduced, is constrained to admit that there is a question and answer in v. 9, though he will not hear of any other dialogue.

So also those authors who consider the piece as a mere collection of songs bound together by an editor admit a “dramatic flavour” and some dramatic scenes<sup>2</sup>, and certainly

<sup>1</sup> *Dramatis in modum, et tanquam fabula quae in scenis personarum imitatione agi solet, videatur esse compositum.*

Frequenter nos admonere convenit quod libellus hic in modum dramatis textitur. Prologus interp. Ruf. *Opp.* ed. De la Rue III. 26 E—78 c.

<sup>2</sup> “Ein dramatischer Beigeschmack entsteht ganz von selbst...selbst zu eigentlich dramatischen Auftritten kann sich dergleichen leicht steigern, nicht aber zu einem zusammenhängenden Drama.” Budde.

“As a matter of fact Budde himself by the characteristics he assigns to the redactor points the way again past his own hypothesis to the dramatic view of the song.” Rothstein, *Hastings' Bib. Dict.*, iv. 594.

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anyone who is satisfied of the unity of the poem cannot feel any doubt that it is a *dramatic poem*.

A far more difficult question arises here which requires the most careful consideration. The question is whether this unquestionably dramatic poem is in fact a *drama* intended to be represented on a stage. A true solution of this question is vital to the interpretation of the poem. It is one thing to assign portions of a dramatic poem to the correct speakers, and to indicate the time, place, circumstances and conditions under which each speaks, or recounts or explains—who is thought to be present, or, whether present or absent, to be addressed or invoked—or what history of the past is related. It is quite another and a far more difficult enterprise to exhibit the whole piece in the model of a modern drama with acts and scenes, exits and entrances, stage directions and stage effects, and the whole *mise en scène* of a theatre of modern times as M. Bruston has done. If this ancient oriental poem is to be forced into such a mould, the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of its peculiarities will be enormously increased, and it will be almost impossible to explain many of its most characteristic phenomena. Before therefore proceeding to an analysis of the poem, or any attempt to draw out the story it contains, we will first address ourselves to the question whether it may be reasonably supposed to have been intended for dramatic representation on the stage.

Ewald<sup>1</sup> assumes, on very slight grounds, that the Hebrews did possess the rudimentary beginnings of drama<sup>2</sup>, and that Canticles although destined for a very simple stage yet relatively was very complete, and that no competent person could doubt that it was a stage play (*Spielstück*). He proceeds to point out that the principal characters are very few, and that this number has to be regulated by the capacity of the stage which the dramatist has at his disposal, so that he must handle his material and adjust the action with a view to this limited number of actors. Pointing to this peculiarity of the form, that often one person repeats the speeches of others as viii. 8—10; vi. 10—vii. 1, he asks why the poet adopts this plan of speech

<sup>1</sup> *Dichter*, ed. 1866, i. 1, p. 65 f.

<sup>2</sup> He considers נָשׂוּי Nahum iii. 6 and נָשׂוּי Zach. v. 6 to have the meaning θέατρον, *Schaustück*.